

3. ON MERMAIDS AND MANATEES: A FIRST APPROACH TO THE EVOLUTION OF NATURAL HISTORY IMAGES IN EARLY MODERN TIMES

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INTRODUCTION

Historically from the sea, this vast space of salty water, although it is the primary and essential source and unit of life, only came chaos, threat and destruction. And so, following the natural disorder of this element, inevitably, sea monsters arose. They have always been elements strange to people, unknown beings that are born and live and emerge from the sea. Even that they are, in fact, real marine mammals, they are perceived as monsters and retold in stories and paintings as monsters (Almaça, 1998; Brito, 2010). We could be referring to whales, dolphins, seals, as well as to marine reptiles and birds, and large fish, but in this example we are using manatees and dugongs as a case study. Here, the sea and its beasts emerge in a real duality between the mundane and the mythical and mystic and, consequently, above and beyond manatees we are studying mermaids.

Mermaids and manatees exist through time and cultures in a limb, in between the real life and the world of imagination, in the middle of the everyday life of the sailors and the world of every people's dreams, allegories, beliefs, superstitions and even fears (Carrington, 1957; Brito, 2010). Their environmental, cultural and folk manifestations, and its presence and expression in forms either of myths and natural histories, will be addressed in this work. Having as main sources written material and iconography, the stories and the images are presented in a temporal journey from Europe to the West coasts of Africa, from the Caribbean Islands, the Brazilian shores and rivers, to the Indian Ocean.

Marine mammals are a highly specialized group of mammals that have adapted to the sea and that depends on it totally (cetaceans and sirenia) or at least during part of its life cycle (seals, sea lions, sea otters and walruses). Manatees (Family Trichechidae) and dugongs (Family Dugongidae) are herbivorous marine mammals (Order Sirenia) also named sea cow, ox-fish or fish-woman. These animals are at the origin of a complex discussion about mermaids and the biological or scientific basis behind the fabulous descriptions of these mythological beings. It was based on knowledge from the New World and the Atlantic explorations, during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, that much of this myth was unveiled and new information enriched the natural history archives. However, while natural sciences were not truly developed, it was mostly the legends and the myths that dominated all the stories around mermaids and manatees.

With regard to European natural history it was Aldrovandi (1613) that published a description and a drawing of the manatee, a copy of the one published by Clusius (1605). In fact, all European descriptions for these animals are based on natural knowledge obtained from Oviedo (1995) in his work published in 1526 and Clusius for

the Caribbean's shores. But regarding the Atlantic natural history, and considering sources that combine both written and iconographic descriptions, it can be mentioned the work by Cavazzi (1965) for West Africa published in 1687 where he describes and illustrates with detail the fish-woman of those shores. It must also be highlighted the work written between 1624 to 1627 by Cristóvão de Lisboa (1967) that together with the written description presents an extremely detailed and accurate illustration of a manatee.

Later European encyclopedic treaties do not reach for this new Atlantic/Portuguese knowledge, maybe because it was not printed and disseminated, but rather they remain true to previous European authors (Brito, 2010). Some records of manatees from the Atlantic world were lost for its time, and the natural knowledge contained within was only recovered during the twenty century. This allows us now to address its historical value but the coeval instructive and scientific value that they hold was lost.

MERMAIDS: FROM THE MIDDLE AGES INTO THE RENAISSANCE

Mermaids also known as Sirens are, typically, the representation of all types of threats in the sea (Kaplan, 2013). Mermaids are legendary creatures, sometimes considered as sea monsters, with head and chest of a woman and the rest of the body as a bird or, according to later North European legends, to a fish (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1982). They appear in the folklore of many cultures worldwide and, sometimes even within the same tradition; they are represented as contradictory beings (Carrington, 1957). Mermaids or Sirens are depicted as perilous creatures associated with floods, storms, shipwrecks, and drowning. They lured sailors with the beauty of their face and the melody of their songs, drawing them into the sea and devouring them. Usually they represent the dangers of sailing and navigations and the very image of death. But, on the other hand, they can also represent benevolence and love (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1982). Since the classical antiquity to the Middle Ages, throughout the early modern period, to the modern times, historical sightings by sailors may have been the result of misunderstood encounters with these aquatic mammals. And consequently, there has always been some confusion between the legend and the animal (see figures 1, 2 and 3).



Figure 1. A mermaid (a half fish half human being) in “*Bestiarium, En andere teksten*” (www.arkyves.com).



Figure 2. A mermaid (*Syrena*) in the work by Jacob van Maerlant “*Der Naturen Bloeme*”. (www.arkyves.com).



Figure 3. A violin playing mermaid, in an iconographic medieval representation (www.arkyves.com).

In the medieval herbary *Hortus Sanitatis* (1497), *syrenas* are considered deadly animals that have the figure of a woman with a hideous face. In his treaty, the author goes on to say that appear with *cetibus*, and that females have fetuses and breast-feed their young. Since the end of the 14th century, following the Iberian Atlantic expeditions to Africa and the overseas, new encounters with large and strange marine mammals revived the legend of mermaids. First encounters should have been during the sailing and explorations of the West coasts of Africa during the 15th century. But descriptions from

this period mainly reflect encounters with manatees. In 1493 while sailing off the coast of Hispaniola, Christopher Columbus reported seeing three "female forms" which "*rose high out of the sea, but were not as beautiful as they are represented*" (see Brito, 2010). But also for the kingdom of Portugal, Damião de Góis (2002) in his description of the city of Lisbon (*Urbis Olisiponis description*, 1554) refers sirens, nereids and tritons as such:

(...) a kind of people that the locals start calling marine men because they have the skin surface with scales scattered almost over the entire body (...) such people owed their origin to marine men or tritons (...) The Tritons jumped to the shore and, once in a while, had the custom to come to the beach (...)

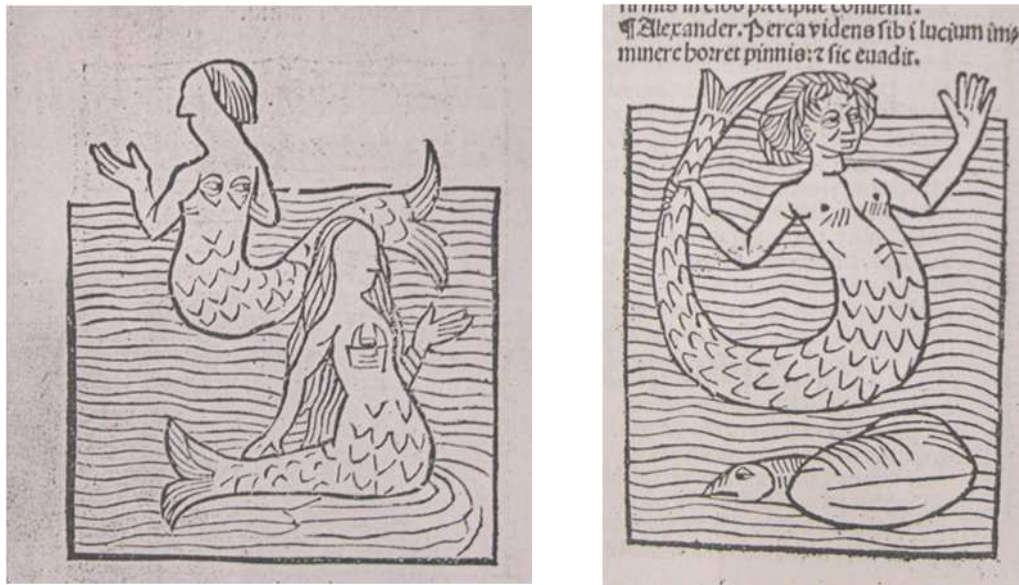


Figure 4. Depictions of mermaids, tritons and marine men in the work "*Hortus Sanitatis*" 1491 (Library of the National Museum of Natural History Madrid).

Either by written words or by visual depictions, these types of human-like marine monsters, are part of European natural history treaties (see figures 5 and 6).

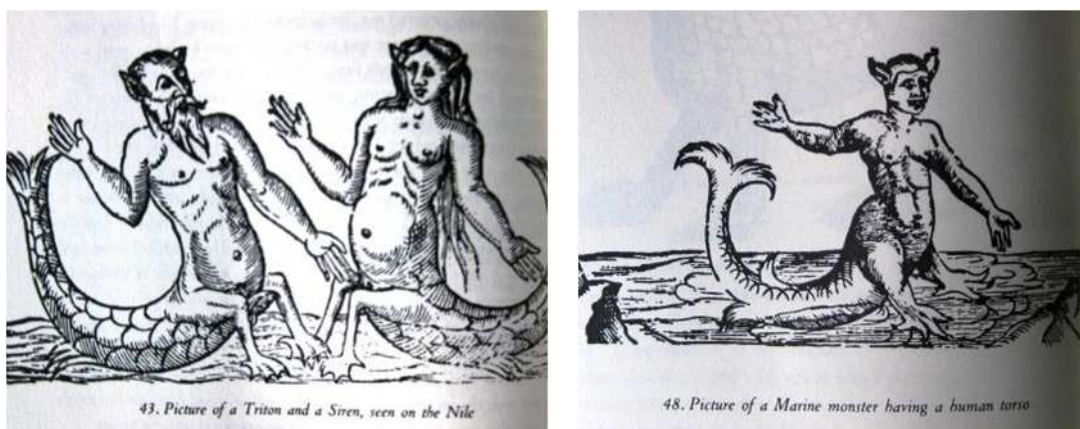


Figure 5. Representation of mermaid, triton and marine monsters in the work by Ambroise Paré, *On monster and marvels* 1585.



Figure 6. Representation of a mermaid in the “Whale Book” by Adriaen Coenen. This image is a copy of the one in “Hortus Sanitatis” which is repeated in several medieval and Renaissance treaties.

In fact, both Ambroise Paré (1982), in his 1585 treaty on monsters and marvels including several entrances for mermaids or marine monsters with human figures, and Adriaen Coenen (2003) with his double tailed mermaids inserted in his 16th century fish and whale books, made note of the existence of such beings. These descriptions are often side by side with description of real marine species and also with other exotic singularities.

MANATEES: NEW MARINE ANIMALS FROM THE NEW WORLD

As soon as news reports from the New World arrive to Europe, it becomes clear that a particular exotic marine animal is being described and illustrated: the manatee (see figures 7 and 8). These descriptions are the result of observations conducted in the Spanish New World and written and disseminated by European naturalists. António Galvão (1989) wrote for the Antilles in 1497:

Is there a fish called manatim; is big and has a cow's head and face, and also in the flesh it looks very like it (...) and the female has breasts with nipples that feeds its children who are born alive.

In another example, Acosta (1590) also refers to the manatees in the Antilles:

In the islands of Barlavento, namely Spanish Cuba, Puerto Rico, Jamaica, there is the so called manatee, a strange kind of fish, if one can name fish to an animal, whose cubs are born alive, and has teats, and with milk they are raised, and eats herb in the fields; but indeed, usually resides in the water. Due to the mentioned reasons, they eat it as fish, but when in the Holy Sunday, when I ate it in a Friday, it almost had scruples, because the colour and flavour seemed like nothing but veal chops or knuckle chops, the slices of this fish: Is big as a cow.

In Europe, Rondelet (1554) had already described the manatees. However, he did not provide any illustration. To the European natural history, it was Aldrovandi who in 1613, assembled the description and illustration of the manatee, an exact copy of the illustration that had been published by Clusius. All the European descriptions of the manatee, even the latest from Jonston, are based on Oviedo's and Clusius' knowledge of the Caribbean and on their publications on the subject (Brito, 2010).

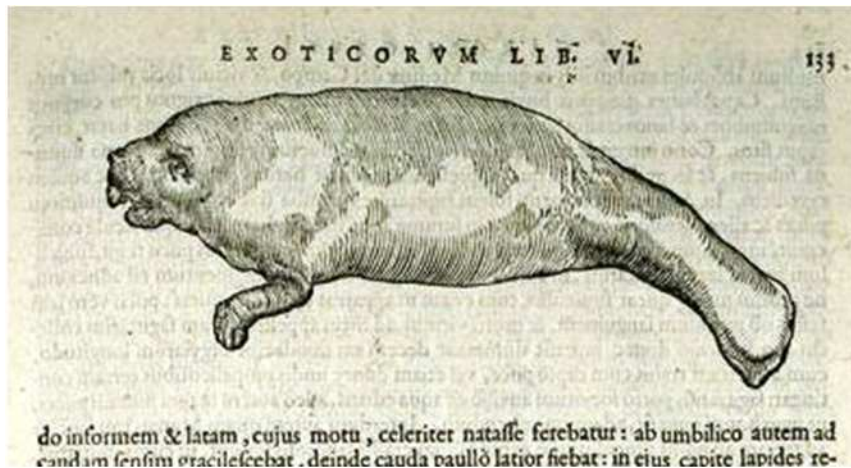


Figure 7. A manatee in the work by Carolus Clusius "Exoticorum" 1605 (Library of the Madrid Botanical Garden).



Figure 8. A manatee in the work by Aldrovandi (1613), a copy of the image published by Clusius (1605) (Library of the National Museum of Natural History Madrid).

Considering the sources for the Portuguese Atlantic in the 17th century, we can find two very important references: Father Cavazzi (1665) writing for West Africa and Father Cristóvão de Lisboa (1647) writing for Brazil.

Frei Cristóvão de Lisboa (1647) in his “*História dos Animais e Árvores do Maranhão*”, published in Lisbon in 1647, presents a brief but detailed description of the Brazilian manatee and accompanies it with a very good illustration of the animal (Figure 9).

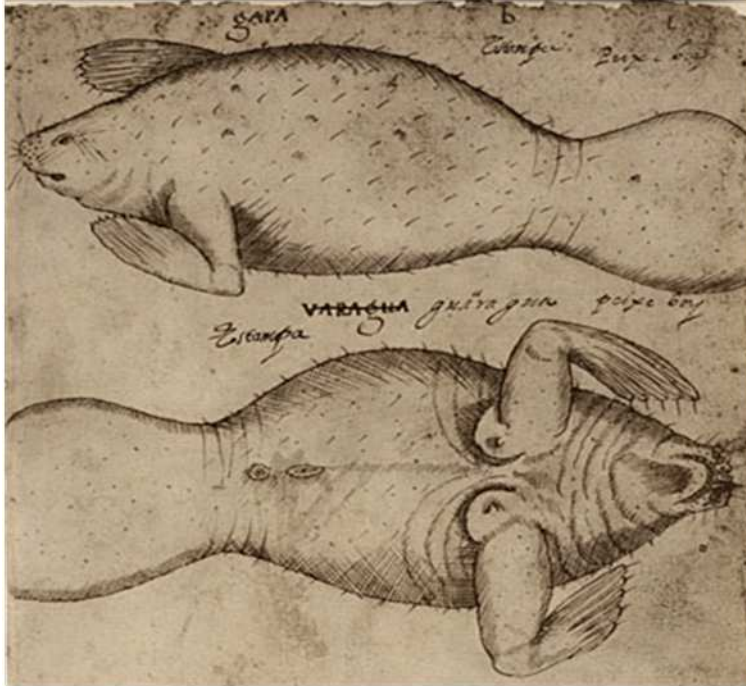


Figure 9. A manatee, also called *piraíba*, in the work by Frei Cristóvão de Lisboa (1647) (Overseas Historical Archive Lisbon).

Cavazzi (1665) in his “*Relação dos três reinos do Congo*”, published in 1687, also gives a very detailed description of the so called fish-woman, which is also accompanied by a very interesting image:

There is one [fish] that Europeans call fish-woman and local name is Ngulu-maza [literally, Kikongo or pig water], beautiful name, but so horrendous. Has the muzzle gaping but small in comparison with another that appears to be a male. I think this is the famous triton from fables of mythology, the female may be considered the naiad of the old.

This illustration is inspired in observations of African manatees, in a representation which clearly mixes the morphology of animals with earlier preconceptions of the mythological mermaid. This representation may be one of the links of the passage from the knowledge with a classical and mythological influence to the Renaissance new natural knowledge. According to the author (Cavazzi, 1665):

I was unable to make myself understood about the appearance of this beast to the one who drew his picture, and I forgot to have it painted in those regions. Hopefully this lack will be corrected by the courtesy and common sense of the reader.

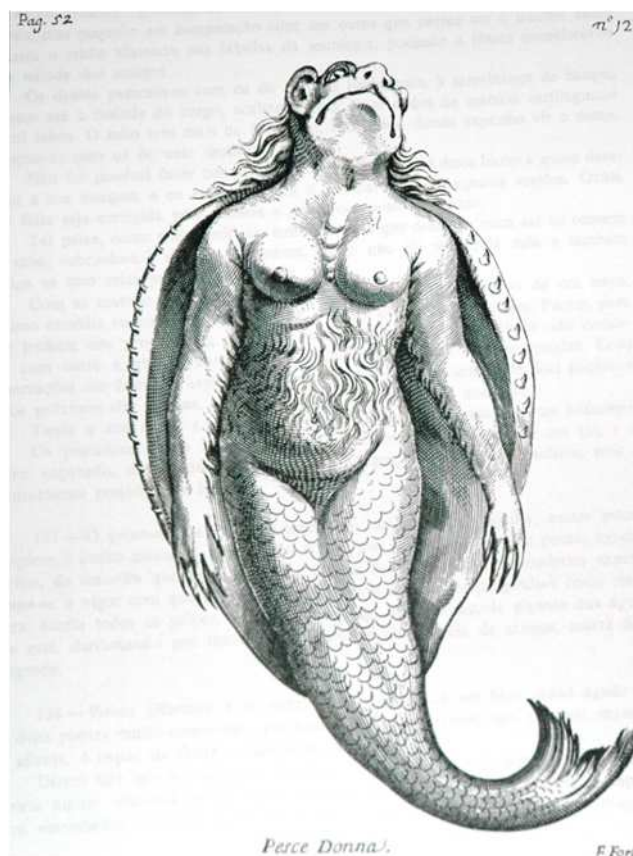


Figure 10. The woman-fish in the work by Cavazzi (1687) (National Library Lisbon).

Even though with some intermixture with the mythological marine being, we can find in these reports a glimpse of the real animal, its anatomical and behavioral characteristics. Anyhow, manatees were only classified as a species (*Trichechus manatus*) by Linnaeus, 1758, and the Order Sirenia was only formed and named in 1811 by Illiger.

FROM MERMAIDS TO MANATEES

Old observations of animals in a limited geographical range may have resulted in the creation of a direct connection between natural beings and its mythological counterparts. Also, the absence of new natural and biological knowledge in Europe is shown by the continuous repetition of myths and superstitions in several types of publications. New encyclopedic natural treaties in the 16th and 7th centuries were mostly repeating classical knowledge, with limited new information on the nature of the new world, either by choice (because European naturalists were simply doing translations and adding comments) or, maybe, due to lack of knowledge. But again, in this period, and following the Atlantic Discoveries, new natural knowledge from the Portuguese Overseas on Atlantic marine mammals comes to light. But it is mostly lost to the central European scientific world and with suffers no influence from it.

To conclude, it was based on knowledge from the New World and the Atlantic explorations, during the 16th and 17th centuries, that much of this myth or mermaids and human marine beings was unveiled and new information enriched the natural history archives. We cannot simply say that since the moment manatees (Figure 11) appeared in human written history, mermaids vanished from memories (Figure 12). Mermaids

are a good example of the persistence into comparatively modern times of a legend that is nearly as old as the written records of man. There is not an age, and hardly a country in the world, whose folklore does not contain some reference to mermaids or to mermaid-like creatures (Carrington, 1957). Certainly, while natural sciences were not truly developed it was mostly the legends and the myths that dominated all types of stories around the subject of mermaids and manatees. And even today, in some cultures, the myth prevails.

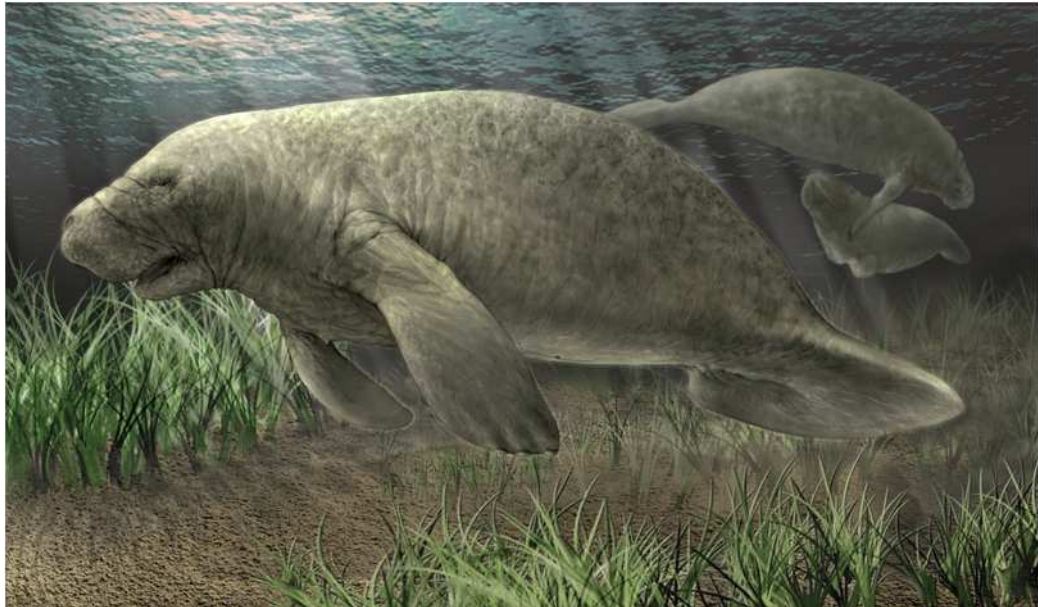


Figure 11. Manatee illustration by Fernando Correia, Portugal 2013 (authorship and © by Fernando Correia).

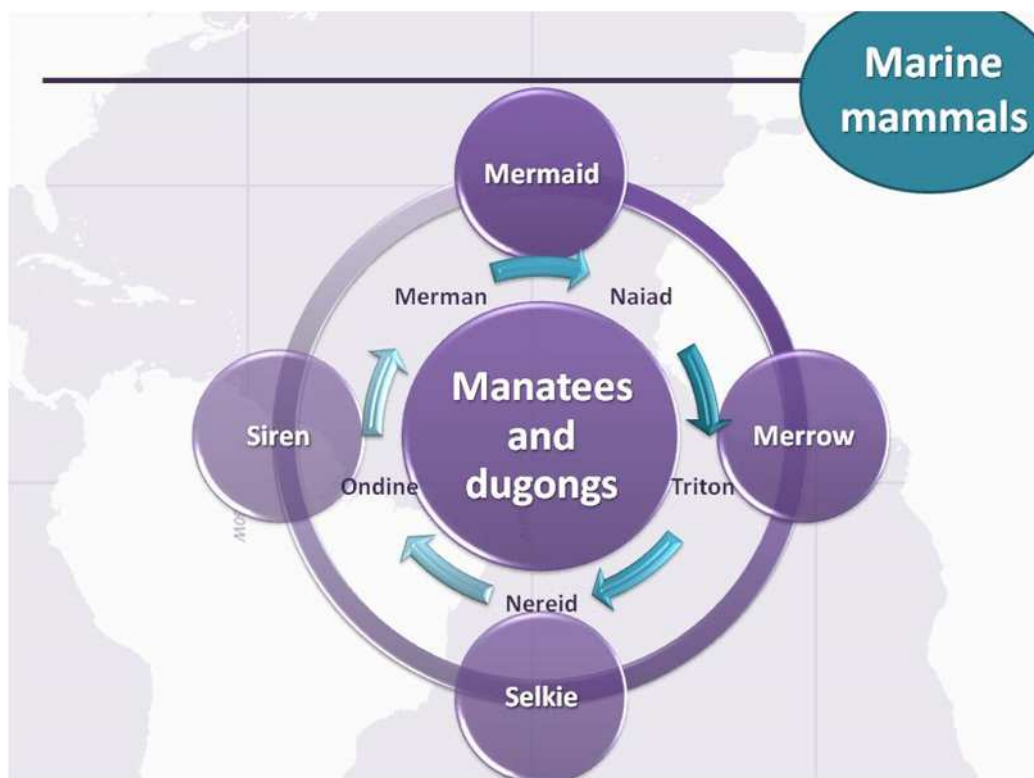


Figure 12. Schematic representation of all known names for mermaids and of how a marine mammal should have been in the origin of all the legends.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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